

THE FLORIDA STUDY OF
PROFESSIONALS FOR

SAFE FAMILIES



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CHILD WELFARE WORKERS' PREPAREDNESS FOR TRANSITION FROM TRAINING TO INDEPENDENT WORK

MARCH 2017

BACKGROUND

National rates of child welfare turnover range from 20-50%, with the highest turnover occurring in the first two years on the job.^{1,2} Though Florida data is unavailable for case managers (CMs), in the 2014-2015 fiscal year, Florida's turnover rate for child protective investigators (CPIs) was 39%.³ Issues such as high caseloads and limited focus on child safety contribute to these high turnover rates.⁴ The effects of high staff turnover are not only financially costly,⁵ but also place children at greater risk for maltreatment recurrence, interfere with timely referrals, and impede child permanency.⁶ Despite these findings, very little research has examined child welfare workers' experiences in training and transitioning into the workforce.

METHODOLOGY

From the larger pool of participants in the Florida Study of Professionals for Safe Families (FSPSF), the researchers randomly invited individuals from each area of the state to participate in a telephone interview. Participation in the telephone interview was voluntary and did not impact eligibility to continue participation in the online portion of the study.

All participants met four criteria: (1) currently employed as a CPI or CM; (2) recently participated in the online portion of the FSPSF study; (3) recently completed pre-service training; and (4) recently acquired an independent caseload. The researchers specifically asked about workers' roles as a CPI or CM, their experiences in pre-service training, their transition to independent caseloads, and their sources of support within the workplace. A team of six FSPSF researchers conducted the interviews and analyzed the transcripts for themes.

FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Thirty-eight participants, including 21 CPIs and 17 CMs, completed interviews, lasting an average of 43 minutes. Most participants were White ($n=21$) or Black ($n=9$) with an average age of 33 years old. Approximately two-thirds of participants had previous child welfare experience.

Findings indicate that workers, regardless of role, felt unprepared for the work, experienced quick transitions into complex caseloads, and expressed concern about a disconnect between training content and agency procedures and protocol.

UNPREPARED FOR THE WORK

Overall, workers perceived training content to be informative, but not comprehensive enough and difficult to apply in the field. Additionally, workers felt they did not have enough shadowing opportunities to prepare them for the realities of the job. Once on the job, caseload volume and intensity were both higher than expected and new workers commonly felt like asking clarifying questions about the job was a burden on their colleagues.

Recommendation: Additional field days and delivery of agency-specific content while in training could help decrease the gap between training and the demands of the job.

QUICK TRANSITIONS

Generally, workers reported that protected caseloads were too short-lived, primarily due to high agency turnover. This felt especially true for workers with previous child welfare experience. Having to quickly learn agency-specific policies and procedures alongside managing a complex caseload was particularly stressful for new workers. Half of workers reported negative agency morale, with more CPIs reporting this than CMs. Of the half that reported positive morale, having accessible supervisors, collaborative coworkers, and a team approach contributed to the positivity.

Recommendation: Guaranteed initial caseload protection, followed by gradual increases, could improve initial worker satisfaction and retention as a long-term strategy to prevent turnover.

AGENCY PROCEDURES AND PROTOCOL

Though topical education and job-related skill-building in preservice training was considered useful, workers noted a lack of training on agency-specific procedures and protocols. Because of this, workers sometimes perceived incongruence between the goal of child safety and agency protocols once on the job. Workers reported being unfamiliar with agency procedures such as overtime protocol, case assignment protocol, and Florida Safe Families Network computer documentation. Moreover, workers commonly felt they could not complete required tasks without working overtime.

Recommendation: Educate workers about agency policies, including overtime and FSFN documentation protocol, to ensure that new workers utilize available job resources while following agency policy.

¹ Balfour, D., & Neff, D. (1993). Predicting and managing turnover in human service agencies: A case study of an organization in crisis. *Public Personnel Management*, 22(3), 473-486.

² Smith, B. D. (2005). Job retention in child welfare: Effects of perceived organizational support, supervisor support, and intrinsic job value. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 27(2), 153-169.

³ Florida Department of Children and Families. (2015). *Child protective investigator and child protective investigator supervisor educational qualifications, turnover, and working conditions status report: Annual report*. Tallahassee, FL: Florida Department of Children and Families, Office of Child Welfare.

⁴ Government Accountability Office. (2003). *Child welfare: HHS could play a greater role in helping child welfare agencies recruit and retain staff* [GAO-03-357]. Washington, DC: Author.

⁵ Graef, M. I., & Hill, E. L. (2000). Costing child protective services staff turnover. *Child Welfare*, 79, 517-533.

⁶ Flower, C., McDonald, J., & Sumski, M. (2005, January). *Review of turnover in Milwaukee County private agency child welfare ongoing case management staff*. Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky, College of Social Work.

Funding Provided By:



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